

**No. 1-10**

# IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

**HEADQUARTERS, DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY**  
**JANUARY 1959**



## FOREWORD

Much Army writing is stilted, verbose, and hard to understand. It wastes manpower by wasting the time of writers and readers. We must reduce this drain on our resources.

If you want to improve your writing, you can. Classroom instruction is available to many, but self-help is available to all. This pamphlet will help you develop a feeling for clear, modern style, and the ability to recognize gobbledygook in all its forms.

Commanders at every level should strive to improve their own writing, and insist on equal effort by all members of their staffs. The people who write well should be openly commended; those who need help should get it. Impetus must come from the top.

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## IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

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## CHAPTER 1

### IMPROVING ARMY WRITING

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**1. Purpose.** This pamphlet aims to help Army writers recognize and use a modern, more effective style of writing. It deals with attitudes, methods, and techniques, rather than with rules of grammar and composition. It offers methods and suggestions which can be applied to Army letters, reports, staff papers, regulations, and manuals.

**2. The personal viewpoint.** Writing is intensely personal. Some people feel that their writing style is an expression of individuality. They are sensitive about it and reluctant to change from an older to a modern style. Yet modern writing is just as personal and individual, and represents the writer and his job more accurately. Army writers must be as conscious of outdated writing as they are of outdated dress or equipment. They must also be as cost-conscious about their writing as they are about other expenditures of time and money. The cost of writing, distributing, reading, applying, and filing a single page is measured in tens, hundreds, even thousands of dollars.

**3. Changing with the times.** Business writing has evolved steadily from the ornate formalism of past generations until today it resembles the spoken language of commerce. The change to shorter and simpler forms has been faster in recent years, reflecting our preference for streamlined methods in business and government. But it is even more a recognition of the fact that writing is more effective when it is easy to read.

**4 Government style.** Some Government writers have been slow to adopt a modern style because they have relied too long on forms and phrases inherited from predecessors. Some have been misled in believing that this tired jargon is both official and impressive, when it is, in fact, only muddy and weak. It has well earned the derisive names of "federalese" and "gobbledygook." It is never used in oral communication, where it would sound ridiculous, but it appears often in writing.

**5. Modern style.** Today's style is characterized by a clear purpose, clearly and simply expressed. It reflects the clean, functional lines of modern design. There is a strong preference for short

words, short sentences, and short paragraphs. Chapter 2 suggests a method for defining the purpose and for outlining a way to achieve effective writing. Chapter 3 tells how to give your writing clear, concise, and vigorous expression. A little extra effort in applying these suggestions will produce measurable improvement—for those who want to improve.



## CHAPTER 2

### PREPARING TO WRITE

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**6. Lay a foundation.** Effective writing is based on adequate preparation—the analysis, selection, and organization of ideas. You select a worthwhile objective, marshal your forces, and organize the attack. This preparation may take a few seconds or a few days, depending on the size of the problem, but either way it will be the most important part of your total writing effort. Preparation involves thinking the problem through before writing about it, and finding answers to the questions *who*, *what*, *why*, and *how*.

**7. Identify the reader.** You communicate effectively only when you use words and ideas your readers understand easily. Whether they “read you” with ease and understanding will depend on their knowledge and experience—not on yours. Matter intended for general distribution should be pitched at the educational level of the great middle bracket of readers, and their reading skill may be less than you think. You can use technical terms and abbreviations when your readers are all technical people; but if what you write is also intended for untrained men, use simple, nontechnical language. Technical lingo, unfamiliar abbreviations, uncommon words, and complicated sentences hide the meaning and make hard reading. Many military directives are written at college graduate levels of readability and comprehension, although men of modest education must read and act on them. The first step in preparing to write is to ask yourself: “Who must read and understand this?” The answer will affect the ideas as well as the words you use and must be kept in mind throughout the preparation and writing phases.

**8. Determine the purpose.** Every paper should have a worthwhile purpose, or remain unwritten. A purpose is worthwhile when it is important enough to offset the substantial costs of preparing, sending, reading, acting on, and recording it. But a purpose is more than justification—it is the “big idea” on which the writing is based. Each paper requires both a general purpose and a specific objective, and together they make the writing more direct, forceful, and concise.

*a. General purpose.* Whatever the subject, Army writing has

one of three general purposes: (1) *to direct*, (2) *to inform*, or (3) *to persuade*. All three are concerned with who, what, when, where, why, and how, but the emphasis differs. A directive usually emphasizes *what* is to be done, informative writing *how* to do something, and persuasive writing *why* something should be done. The general purposes often overlap, as when informative writing is made more understandable by an explanation of *why*, but the writer must know which to emphasize. For example, a writer seeking approval of a new device would want to describe *how* it works, but emphasize *why* it should be used. Keeping the general purposes in mind helps the writer to find clear explanations or convincing reasons to support the specific objective.

*b. Specific objective.* The second step in preparation is to find an answer to the question: "What is my objective?" The answer may be obvious or require long study; but if it is clear it will lead to clear writing, and if it is vague the writing will be vague. If you find it hard to define your objective, take heed; for if it is not clear to you it cannot be clear to anyone. It helps to write the statement of objective. It should be concise, but it must say exactly what you want to do. These statements of objective are too general: *Request for funds. Instruction in sanitation.* These might be specific enough: *My objective is to get \$25,000 to build a man-proof fence around the petroleum dump. My objective is to instruct mess personnel in sanitary methods of handling and storing perishable foods.*

**9. Identify main ideas.** Successful writers, teachers, and salesmen know that deciding what to leave out is almost as important as deciding what goes in their papers, lessons, or sales talks. Words, ideas, or facts that are not essential to the understanding or acceptance of your specific objective can only obscure and weaken it. Whether writing is based on personal knowledge or research, the problem is usually too much material rather than too little. Consequently, preparing to write is largely a process of defining, sifting, and discarding until there are left only a clear objective and the ideas necessary to support it.

*a. How to develop main ideas.* A simple device, much used in advertising contests, can help you identify ideas needed to support your objective. It is the one in which contestants complete, in 25 words or less, a sentence that begins: "I like (name of product) because." To the written statement of your objective add the *why* and *how* reasons that will achieve it. Limit yourself to 25 additional words so that you are forced to select only basic explanations or arguments. These are the *main* ideas, not to be confused or mixed with the facts, figures, or examples that support them.

- (1) The example which follows contains a statement of objective and the main ideas that sustain it. The general purpose is to persuade.

My objective is to get \$25,000 to build a man-proof fence around the petroleum dump—

(why?) Pilferage is costly and in-creasing	} 19 words
(why?) Constant threat of sabotage	
(why?) Location is vulnerable	
(why?) Guard is inadequate	
(how?) Fence will solve problem	

The emphasis is properly on *why* ideas, with the one *how* idea serving as a conclusion and restatement of the specific objective.

- (2) By changing the emphasis from *why* to *how* the same technique can be applied to informative writing.

My objective is to instruct mess personnel in sanitary methods of handling and storing foods—

(how?) Showing how to prevent spoilage  
(how?) Showing how to prevent contamination  
(why?) It saves lives and money

In this example the *why* idea would make a good introduction because it attracts attention and motivates the reader. The emphasis is on the two *how* items, and most of the space would be devoted to these items.

- (3) A directive is simply a statement of purpose in imperative form, expanded to include essential detail.

My objective is to get a man-proof fence built around the petroleum dump—

(what?) Build a man-proof fence  
(where?) Around the petroleum dump  
(when?) By 30 November 1958  
(who?) Post Engineer  
(how?) Lump-sum contract  
(why?) Reduce pilferage and threat of sabotage  
(why?) Avoid hiring additional guards

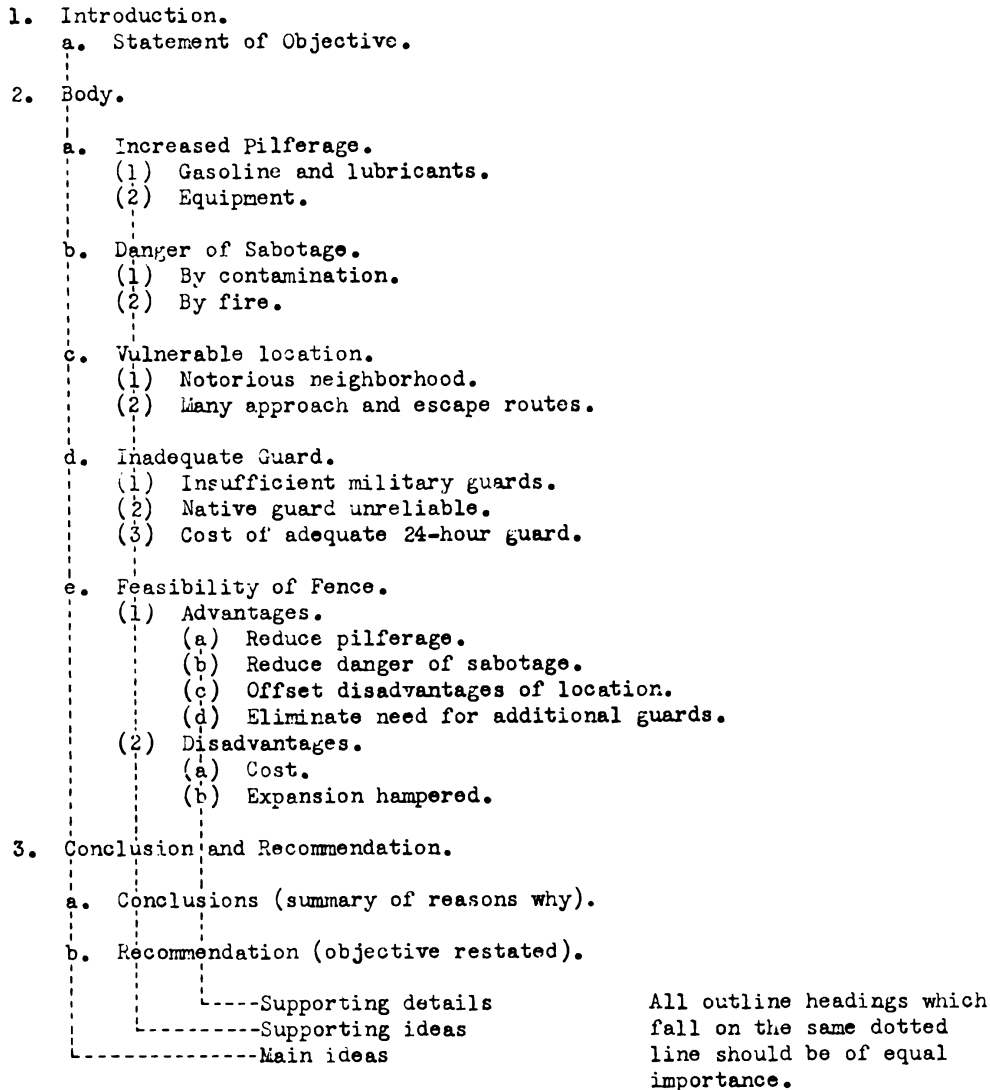
b. *Analyze ideas.* It is important that you distinguish between main and supporting ideas. The main ideas in any writing are about equal in importance. They are so vital to the purpose that leaving one out unbalances the rest, like taking one leg from a table. If you find more than five main ideas in the body of your outline, analyze it carefully to see if subordinate ideas have been raised to main idea level. The main ideas in describing an automobile might be *engine, transmission, chassis, and body*. If parts such as pistons or seats are included as main ideas the organization is impaired. For another purpose, the main ideas about an automobile might be *performance, economy, and reliability*, while 110 miles an hour, 20 miles per gallon, and freedom from repairs would be supporting ideas.

**10. Make an outline.** Any paper can be written more quickly and logically from an outline—either a simple outline in your mind or a more complicated outline on paper. You can easily expand a statement of objective and main ideas into a working outline. Fill in the supporting ideas, then add the introduction and the conclusion and recommendation. The statement of objective and main ideas in paragraph 9a might be expanded into the working outline shown in figure 1.

**11. Search and research.** A writer encourages originality when he searches among his own thoughts before researching among the ideas of others. Doing this will also give direction to your research by identifying subject areas in which you need more information. During this research phase, your outline will undergo many changes, often complete revision. An outline will help you to recognize and catalog the significant pros and cons of your subject. When you find significant facts or ideas, note them on small cards or pieces of paper, together with the specific references. This permits you to arrange them by subject and saves time when you want to refer again to the source document.

**12. Write from your outline.** A working outline is more a sketch than a blueprint. It makes your writing plan easy to see—and easy to change when better ideas occur. For every point on your outline you do not necessarily have a paragraph; that is, every idea shown on a working outline does not have to have a paragraph or subparagraph by itself. On original drafts of long papers, it helps to write each paragraph, double spaced, on a separate half-sheet of paper. This enables you to rearrange paragraphs easily and discourages long-winded paragraphs. A letter based on the outline in figure 1 might look like this:

## OUTLINE CHART



*Figure 1.*

1. Due to lack of adequate means of safeguarding our petroleum storage area, pilferage and possible sabotage continue to threaten its operation. We propose to solve this problem through the erection of a suitable fence, and request the allocation of \$25,000 for this purpose.
2. Theft is increasing in spite of many arrests. Losses to date include several thousand gallons of gasoline and large quantities of oil and grease. Last week, for example, thieves stole 200 5-gallon cans, several hoses, and a number of handtools, all of which are still missing.

3. Danger of sabotage is real and constant. There are unfriendly elements and undoubtedly many enemy agents in the local population. We find it impossible, with the means at our disposal, to keep unauthorized persons from entering the area. It would be possible for an enemy to set fires or to put acids or other contaminants into fuels or lubricants.
4. Because of its location the petroleum dump is especially vulnerable to thieves or saboteurs. The nearby civilian area harbors a criminal element which is bold and aggressive in spite of numerous arrests. Petroleum products will attract them as long as these products command high prices in black markets. The many approach and escape routes between the civilian area and the dump increase the difficulty of the situation.
5. The three military and twelve native civilian guards cannot cover the area often enough, on a 24-hour basis, to keep all intruders out. The local guards are not reliable unless they are closely supervised. Our request for more military guards to provide closer supervision was disapproved, and without them we believe that increasing the civilian guard is neither practical nor economical.
6. The alternative to increasing the guard, and a better solution, is to build a man-proof fence around the storage area. It will reduce pilferage enough to pay for itself in 2 years. It will also reduce the danger of sabotage by making it more difficult for unauthorized persons to enter the area. A fence will offset to some extent the disadvantages of the location, and additional guards will not be needed.
7. The disadvantages of fencing the area are cost and limitation of future expansion. We estimate the original cost will be \$25,000 and annual maintenance about \$1,000. If we attempt now to inclose all of the area that might be used for future expansion, it would cost \$40,000. Plans for expansion of this area are uncertain. Therefore, we think it will prove more economical to fence only the present area.
8. The security of the petroleum storage area requires immediate strengthening. We believe that the advantages in constructing a man-proof fence around the area outweigh the disadvantages and that the fence will solve the problem effectively. We recommend the allocation of \$25,000 to permit the construction of this fence. The attached drawings and specifications show the details.

**13. Review for objectivity.** When you have finished your first draft, you should review and revise your work. As you do this, concentrate on the objectivity of your discussion. Military writing in particular should be objective whether it be persuasive or informative writing. When you present a decision or recommendation, your reader presumes that it is the result of objective thinking. Staff studies and reports require you to discuss disadvantages and objections as fully as the advantages, and from them to draw conclusions and recommendations. In letters and memorandums you need to mention only briefly the disadvantages that you have considered and set aside in favor of the recommended course of action.



## CHAPTER 3

### WRITING

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#### Section I. WORDS

**14. Write modern.** When you have identified your audience, defined your purpose, and outlined your ideas you are ready to write. This section offers useful suggestions about the use of words; sections II and III cover modern sentences and paragraphs.

**15. Vocabulary.** An extensive vocabulary is a fine asset, but better for catching than for pitching. It enables you to grasp quickly the ideas tossed at you, but it may not help you to put your ideas across to someone with a smaller or different stock of words. Base your writing on the vocabulary of your readers. A word may be precisely correct and still be undesirable if your audience finds it hard to read. When the reader's eye registers a long or unfamiliar word, his comprehension stops while the eye and mind back up for another look. When this happens often, reading is hard and dull. *Simians indigenous to Zamboanga are destitute of caudal appendages.* That sentence is correct, but this one is easier and better: *Monkeys have no tails in Zamboanga.*

**16. Verbs.** Verbs are the most important words in any language because they mean action. They are the voice of command. They can make writing vigorous and direct, or flabby and roundabout.

*a. Verb-icide.* Active verbs are often converted into nouns, which always require the addition of a weaker passive verb. A simple sentence such as *the doctor examined him* is stretched into *his examination was conducted by the doctor*. The simple statement *he decided* swells up to *the decision was made by him*. Look out for such nouns as examination, decision, action, preparation, performance, accomplishment, and others derived from verbs. Use the active verb itself whenever possible.

*b. Smothered verbs.* Simple, straightforward verbs are often smothered under useless phrases. Notice how *correct* and *have* are buried in this sentence: *It is requested that you take immediate steps to accomplish the correction of your records and that you transmit a request to your home office with a view to having them make a similar correction.* It is more straightforward to say: *Please correct your records promptly and ask your home office to correct theirs.*



**17. Specific words.** Use specific rather than general words. Don't say *machine* when you refer specifically to a bulldozer, mimeograph, or sedan. Don't speak of *personnel* if you mean men or the men of Company B. Don't say *an official* if you mean The Adjutant General. It is usually better to refer to General Omar Bradley than to a former Chief of Staff, or to Doctor Albert Einstein than a famous mathematician.

**18. Personal words.** *a. I and we.* When you prepare official correspondence to be signed by someone other than the commander, you properly should avoid the use of *I*. But you gain nothing by using the impersonal *it is* in place of *we* or *this headquarters*. In correspondence in which you speak for yourself, you should refer to yourself as *I*. The self-conscious use of *the writer*, *this officer*, and *the undersigned* is not dictated by any regulation or valid custom of the service.

*b. You.* Some letter writers set the scene for a friendly letter by saluting "Dear Mr. Jones," and by referring to "your letter," and then lapse into completely impersonal references to applicants, persons, individuals concerned, and those who—anything but *you*. There is no place in official correspondence for the breezy familiarity of some sales letters, but there is no objection to a personal letter like this:

*Dear Dr. Smith: We are glad that you want to become a contract physician at an Army hospital near your home. We are sending your letter to the commanding officer of the hospital at Fort Ward and suggest that you call on him. There may not be a vacancy, but he will be pleased to discuss this matter with you.*

*c. Readability of personal words.* One of the measures of human interest in writing, and a factor in readability, is the number of personal words and personal sentences. In *The Art of Readable Writing*, Rudolf Flesch defines personal words as nouns or pronouns that refer specifically to people and have natural masculine or feminine gender: *you, he, she, John Jones, Mary, iceman, actress*. Excluded are all the neuter words: *it, its, itself, teacher, employee*. Personal sentences are spoken sentences, often with speech tags such as "he said" or "I replied." Personal sentences are also those which are addressed directly to the reader such as commands, questions, or requests. Writing style is described as interesting when 15 percent of the sentences and 7 percent of the words are personal (this is about equal to the Reader's Digest). If 5 percent of the sentences and 4 percent of the words are personal, the style rates as mildly interesting and compares with

the average trade journal. This does not mean that you should count the personal words and sentences in every paper you write, but you will find it pays to check representative samples.

**19. The law.** Much of the Army's business is based on laws and regulations. As a result, too much Army writing is stuffed with legal jargon that only a lawyer can read and understand with ease. Army writers should translate this complex language into simple ideas and readable sentences. Look at this involved sentence, which runs to 72 words:

*An individual, or his estate in the event of death, may, by application to this commission within 90 days following the date of the damage alleged to have been sustained, or by 30 June 1957, whichever is the later date, and by submitting such documentary evidence as may be required by the commission, establish entitlement to reparation in an amount not exceeding the fair market value of the property damaged or destroyed.*

This is better:

*You may send your claim for damages within 90 days after the damage occurred or by 30 June 1957, whichever is later. The documentary evidence the commission requires must accompany your claim. Reparations are limited to the fair market value of the property damaged or destroyed.*

**20. Obfuscation.** To obfuscate is to cloud, confuse, darken, or muddle. The word is a good example of its own definition. One way to obfuscate is to use long or unfamiliar words when short and simple ones will do as well. In place of plain, purposeful words like *make* or *do*, the "obfuscator" will use *construct*, *fabricate*, *accomplish*, *perform*, *consummate*, or *effect*. He does not like to *begin* or *start* anything; he prefers to *initiate*, *commence*, or *inaugurate* it. He will not *send* a message, but he may *forward*, *transmit*, or *communicate* it. He does not like to *send out* or *circulate* information, but he will *promulgate* or *disseminate* it. He dislikes all short words like *if*, *so*, *for*, and *but* and would rather use *in the event of*, *therefore*, *on behalf of*, and *nevertheless*. He will agree with you that there is room for improvement, but he wishes that you would say *amelioration*. Don't do it!

**21. Exaggeration.** Avoid words or phrases that exaggerate or overstate a fact or condition. Don't say you have made an exhaustive search if you only looked through a file. "Tried" is usually better than "strenuous effort." Use sparingly such descriptives as *inestimable*, *incalculable*, *terrific*, and *highly*.

**22. Pointer words.** Pointer words are useful but seldom necessary. You can usually dispense entirely with *herein*, *herewith*, (*inclosed herewith*), *hereunder*, *hereto*, (*attached hereto*), *hereinafter*, *hereinbefore*.

**23. Crutch words.** *a. Very.* An overworked word is *very*. The weather is never just hot, cold, or mild; it is always *very*. It has worn so thin that saying something is very good is often less emphatic than saying it is good.

*b. And/or.* The use of *and/or* is justified only when the writer is obliged to say "either one or both" in order to keep his meaning straight. Unthinking writers use it in places where the use of "either one or both" would be ridiculous. It is a fair example of how gobbledygook is established. To write that *the Quartermaster procures and/or distributes uniforms* illustrates improper use of *and/or*.

*c. Such.* Careless writers use *such* in place of *this*, *that*, and *these*: *Among the recruits are many high school graduates and such men learn rapidly.* Better: . . . *and these men learn rapidly.* In these examples *such* is correctly used with *as*: *such as* (in place of *for example*) and *such men as these*. There is a limited need for *as such*: *Riflemen, as such, are not entitled to extra pay.* But it is frequently and needlessly used in sentences such as this: *Postmen, as such, walk many miles a day.* The *as such* in the sentence concerning riflemen is justified because it implies that while the man does not draw extra pay simply because he is a rifleman he might draw extra pay for some other reason. It serves no purpose in the sentence concerning postmen because walking is characteristic of the postman's job.

*d. Same.* There is less objection in modern writing than formerly to repeating a word or name in the same sentence or paragraph. This removes any excuse for the much used but never approved use of *same* as a noun or pronoun. *Same* is not an acceptable substitute for building in this sentence: *The new building will not be used until the engineer releases same (it).*

**24. Deadheads.** In railroading, deadheads are nonpaying passengers or empty cars. In writing, deadheads are words or phrases that add nothing to the meaning. Form the habit of cutting the deadheads out of your writing.

*a. Appropriate action.* *Appropriate* is a deadhead in this sentence: *Take appropriate action to move your unit to the new area.* It means the same if you say *take action*, but this whole phrase is a deadhead and the sentence is better without it: *Move your unit to the new area.*

b. *Take steps.* Telling someone to take steps to do something means literally that he should only prepare to do it. If it is your intention that the reader prepare to do something but not actually do it until you give him further instructions, tell him so. If you want him actually to do the thing, tell him to do it and omit reference to the steps.

c. *In case.* *In the case of* and *in the matter of* are usually deadheads. *In the case of Captain Burr's accident, a report will be made to the safety officer.* Better, but passive: *Captain Burr's accident will be reported to the safety officer.* Still better and active voice: *You will report Captain Burr's accident to the safety officer.*

d. *Other deadheads.* In place of these deadheads use the words in parentheses:

- at all times (always)
- at the present time (now)
- at an early date (soon)
- at your earliest convenience (soon, when convenient)
- in compliance with your request (as you requested)
- in the near future (soon)
- in the event that (if)
- in the amount of (for)
- in order to (to)
- in view of the fact that (as)
- afford an opportunity (permit, let, enable)

There are many other empty phrases that you can omit without the slightest loss, such as *wish to take this opportunity*, *wish to state*, and *for the information and guidance of all concerned*. These examples show how writing can be improved by cutting out the deadwood: *I wish to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for your assistance.* Better: *Thank you for your help.* *I wish to state that in my opinion the runway is not sufficiently long for aircraft of this type.* Better: *I believe the runway is too short for a C-54.*

## Section II. SENTENCES

**25. Good sentences.** We speak in sentences; we write in sentences. A single word or phrase sometimes carries a complete thought, but sentences are more often the real units of thought communication. They are more important than words; but good sentences are based on the right word in the right place. Using plain words and short sentences will avoid most of the faults found in bad sentences.

**26. Sentence length.** Sentence lengths should vary. An occasional long sentence is not hard to read if it is followed by shorter

ones. A fair goal for most letterwriters is an average of 21 words per sentence, or less. For longer compositions, such as Army regulations, sentences should average 17 to 19 words. The sentences in opening paragraphs and in short letters may run a little longer than the average. You will find it instructive to count representative samples of your writing occasionally. If a two-idea sentence is divided by a colon, semicolon, or dash, you should count it as two separate sentences.

**27. Brevity.** Sentences written like 10-word telegrams are hard to read. You cannot get the kind of brevity you want by leaving out the articles (a, an, and the). You can get brevity by dividing complex ideas into bite-size sentences and by avoiding deadhead words and phrases, repetition, and elaboration. General of the Army George C. Marshall once remarked critically that "Americans are the greatest elaborators in the world." Here are some suggestions that will help you to write short, straightline sentences.

*a. Use verbs that work.*

(1) *Active voice.* Don't rob your writing of its power by using the passive voice when you can use the active voice. (Passive means that the subject has something done to it by someone; active means that the subject does something to the object.) Nine out of ten sentences will be shorter and stronger in the active voice; e.g., *Our patrol captured an enemy observer* instead of *An enemy observer was captured by our patrol*. *Davy Crockett killed a b'ar when he was only three* is stronger than *A b'ar was killed by Davy Crockett when he was only three*.

(2) *Passive voice.* Of course, situations exist in which the passive voice is justified. If your previous sentences concerned training and you wished to continue to emphasize it, you might say that *training will be supervised by commanders*; otherwise, you would say *commanders will supervise training*. You should not use the passive voice in directives because it does not identify the doer. For example: *This rule will be explained to each applicant* lets the reader guess who will do the explaining. *The adjutant will explain this rule to all applicants*.

*b. Take a direct approach.* Express your ideas immediately and directly. Unnecessary expressions like *it is*, *there is*, and *there are* weaken sentences and delay comprehension. They also tend to place part of the sentence in the passive voice. *It is the recommen-*



*dation of the provost marshal that the report be forwarded immediately is more directly expressed The provost marshal recommends that we send the report immediately.*

*c. Change long modifiers to short ones.*

Colonel Barnes, who is the *president of the board*, will preside.

Vehicles *that are deadlined* are . . .  
They gave us a month for *accomplishment of the task*.

Colonel Barnes, *the board president*, will preside.

*Deadlined* vehicles are . . .  
They gave us a month *to do the job*.

*d. Break up long sentences.*

There is not enough time available for the average commander to do everything that might be done and so it is necessary for him to determine wisely the essentials and do them first, then spend the remaining time on things that are "nice to do."

The average commander lacks time to do everything that might be done. He must decide what is essential and do it first. Then he can spend the remaining time on things that are "nice to do."

**28. Clarity.** You do not need to be a grammarian to recognize a good sentence. After all, the first requirement of grammar is that you focus your reader's attention on the meaning you wish to convey. If you take care to make your meaning clear, your grammar will usually take care of itself. Remember also that proper punctuation is important to clear meaning.

*a. Avoid wandering sentences.* Unity exists when all parts of a sentence contribute to one clear idea or impression. Long, straggling sentences usually contain a hodgepodge of unrelated ideas. You should either break them up into shorter sentences or put the subordinate thoughts into subordinate form. Look at this sentence: *The sergeant, an irritable fellow who had been a truck driver, born and brought up in the corn belt of Iowa, strong as an ox and six feet tall, fixed an angry eye on the new recruit.* You can see that the main idea is "The sergeant fixed an angry eye on the new recruit." That he was *an irritable fellow, strong as an ox and six feet tall* adds to the main idea. But the facts that he had been a truck driver and had been born in Iowa add nothing to the main thought, and the sentence is better without them. *The sergeant, an irritable fellow who was as strong as an ox and six feet tall, fixed an angry eye on the new recruit.*

*b. Avoid ambiguity.* If a sentence can be misunderstood, it will be misunderstood. A sentence which says that *The truck followed the jeep until its tire blew out* may be perfectly clear to the writer, but it will mean nothing to the reader until the pronoun *its*

is identified. *Each recruit must learn to fire a Browning and Garand rifle* may be understandable to some, but a new recruit might wonder whether he had to fire one rifle or two. The order could be easily clarified by adding another *a*: *Each recruit must learn to fire a Browning and a Garand rifle*.

c. *Make sure that your modifiers say what you mean.* *By climbing to the top of the hill, the gun positions could be seen* provides little more than a laugh until you give the first part of the sentence something to modify. This sentence can be corrected by providing a logical subject for the modifier, and changing to the active voice: *By climbing to the top of the hill, our scouts could see the gun positions*. Sometimes simple misplacement of modifiers in sentences leads to misunderstanding: *The artillery shell burst just as we reached the shore with great violence*. You can clarify this sentence simply by rearranging it: *Just as we reached the shore, the artillery shell burst with great violence*.

### Section III. PARAGRAPHS

**29. Short paragraphs.** There are no hard and fast rules on the length of a paragraph, but try to keep them short. Paragraphs exist for clarity and ease of reading. They should include only as much as your reader can grasp in one *mind-full*. The reader should be able to feel that the thought, argument, or logic is progressing as he moves from paragraph to paragraph. Paragraphs in popular books and magazines usually consist of three, four, or five sentences. Most paragraphs in textbooks and manuals run from four to six sentences.

**30. Topic and summary sentences** (fig. 2). The topic sentence introduces an idea. It tells what your paragraph is about and focuses your reader's attention on the main thought. The topic sentence usually comes first; the sentences that follow support it with facts, figures, and details. Occasionally the topic sentence comes last, in which case it is called a summary sentence. If your paragraph is complex, you may need both a topic sentence and a summary sentence. A summary sentence may clinch an argument or reemphasize the main thought introduced in your topic sentence. But whether used first, last, or at the beginning and end of a paragraph, a topic sentence should be used at every opportunity to make your writing clear.

**31. Transitional words and phrases** (fig. 2). Readers often need help in bridging the gaps between sentences and paragraphs. One way to show connection is by introducing sentences with such

words as *besides, again, likewise, for this reason, or of course*. Another way to show continuity and unity is to use personal pronouns. A pronoun which refers back to a word in previous sentences helps to tie your thoughts together.

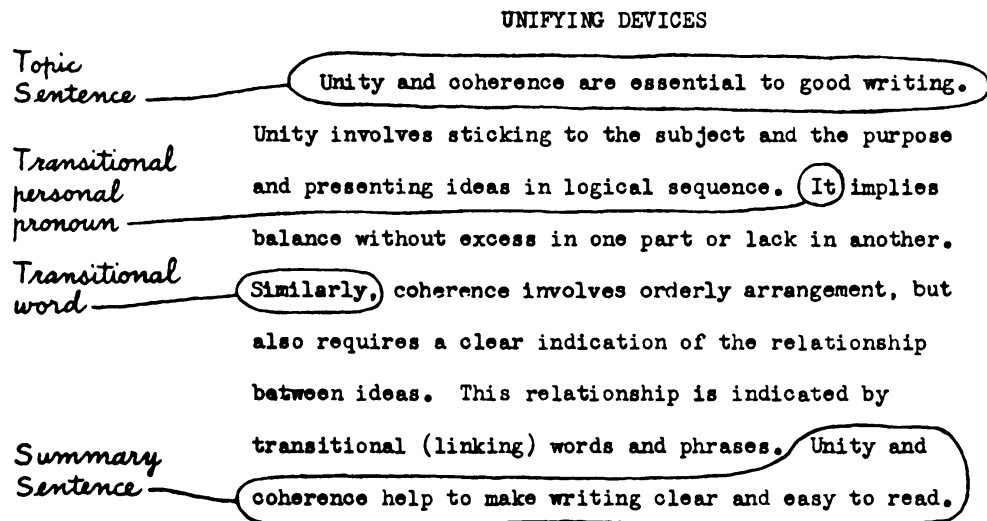


Figure 2.



## CHAPTER 4

### WRITING FORMULAS AND YARDSTICKS

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**32. Their value.** Formulas and yardsticks are often helpful to writers who desire to improve their writing. Formulas are useful in preparing better material; yardsticks test the readability of the written material and indicate whether rewriting is needed. Formulas and yardsticks are helpful but are not a substitute for sound judgment. This chapter describes a writing formula and a yardstick which are valid and which lend themselves readily to military writing.

**33. The 4S formula.** This formula is recommended by the Archivist of the United States in the General Services Administration handbook, *Plain Letters*. The principles of this formula are *shortness*, *simplicity*, *strength*, and *sincerity*. Following are the 17 rules for applying the 4S formula:

*a. For shortness—*

- (1) Don't make a habit of repeating what is said in a letter you answer.
- (2) Avoid needless words and needless information.
- (3) Shorten prepositional phrases.
- (4) Watch out for nouns and adjectives that derive from verbs.
- (5) Don't qualify your statements with irrelevant "ifs."

*b. For simplicity—*

- (1) Know your subject so well you can discuss it confidently and naturally.
- (2) Use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs.
- (3) Be compact. Don't separate closely related parts of sentences.
- (4) Tie your thoughts together so your reader can follow you from one to another without getting lost.

*c. For strength—*

- (1) Use concrete, specific words.
- (2) Use more active verbs.
- (3) Give answer first, then explain if necessary.
- (4) Don't hedge.

d. For *sincerity*—

- (1) Be human.
- (2) Admit mistakes.
- (3) Don't overwhelm your reader with intensives and emphatics.
- (4) Don't be arrogant or servile.

**34. Fog index.** Robert Gunning's *The Technique of Clear Writing* (McGraw-Hill) contains the *Fog Index* for measuring the readability of written material. This yardstick is based on word and sentence length—the longer the words and the sentences, the foggier the meaning. The figure obtained by applying the yardstick represents the number of years schooling the reader must have to understand the writing with ease. The average high school graduate can read, with ease, material with a Fog Index of 12 or less. The Fog Index of this pamphlet is 11.8. Writing that has a Fog Index of more than 12 is in the danger zone, and is likely to be misunderstood. These are the steps in finding the Fog Index of written material:

a. Figure the average sentence length by dividing the number of words by the number of sentences. Use a sample of 100 or more words in figuring average sentence length. Sentences that have two independent clauses separated by a semicolon are counted as two sentences.

b. Compute the percent of hard words. To do this, count the number of words of three or more syllables in the sample, and divide this number by the total number of words in the sample. Omit the following from the count of hard words:

- (1) Verbs that are made three syllables by "ed" or "es," like "donated" or "indorses."
- (2) Combinations of short easy words, like "stockholder" or "airliner."
- (3) Words that are capitalized.

c. Add the average sentence length and the percent of hard words, and multiply by .4. The result is the Fog Index of the material. For example, the Fog Index computation for a 150-word letter containing 10 sentences and 15 words of three or more syllables is as follows:

Average sentence length ( $150 \div 10$ )	15
Percent hard words ( $15 \div 150$ )	+ 10%
	<hr/>
	25
Fog Index factor	× .4
	<hr/>
Fog Index	10

## APPENDIX I

### USEFUL TEXTS

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Many excellent books devoted to better writing are available in bookstores and libraries. This appendix lists only a few.

*Getting Your Ideas Across Through Writing*, by Milton Hall  
for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

*Harbrace College Handbook*, By John C. Hodges (Harcourt,  
Brace)

*Language in Action*, by Samuel I. Hayakawa (Harcourt,  
Brace)

*Plain Letters*, by Mona Sheppard for the National Archives  
and Records Service of the General Services Adminis-  
tration

*Techniques of Clear Informative Writing*, by John McElroy  
(Licensed to agencies of the U. S. Government)

*The Army Writer*, By David Klein (Military Services Pub-  
lishing Co.)

*The Art of Readable Writing*, by Rudolph Flesch (Harper &  
Bros.)

*The Language of Audit Reports*, by Laura Grace Hunter for  
the General Accounting Office

*The Technique of Clear Writing*, by Robert Gunning (Mc-  
Graw-Hill)

*Your Most Enchanted Listener*, by Wendell Johnson (Harper  
& Bros.)

## APPENDIX II

### \*THE WATCHLIST

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Watch for the words and phrases on this list. Some of them are overworked. Others are used incorrectly. Many are longer than necessary.

ABOUT. *He will arrive at about 1600 hours* is not a correct sentence. Use *at* or *about*, but not both.

ABOVE should not be used in the sense of *more than*. *His pay is more than* (not *above*) \$5,000 a year.

ACCOMPANIED BY. The preposition *with* is usually better, as *his letter with* (instead of *accompanied by*) *the application*.

ADVISE. *Tell, inform, and say* are fresher words. *You are advised* is a useless phrase.

AFFECT, EFFECT. *Affect* is always a verb meaning to modify or influence. *Effect* may be a noun or a verb. As a verb it means to accomplish or bring about; as a noun, outcome or result. Both *affect* and *effect* are overworked, both correctly and incorrectly.

AFFORD AN OPPORTUNITY. *Allow* is suggested as a replacement for this overworked phrase.

ALL-AROUND is not correct. Use *all-round*.

ALL OF. Say *all the soldiers*, not *all of the soldiers*.

ALL READY, ALREADY. The first is an adjective phrase, correctly used in this sentence: *When the hour came, they were all ready*. The second is an adverb that oftener than not should be omitted: *We have (already) written a letter*.

ALTERNATIVE, CHOICE. *Alternative* refers to two only; *choice*, to two or more. Since there is only one alternative to another, don't say *the only other alternative*; simply say *the alternative*.

AMOUNT, NUMBER are often used loosely. An *amount* is a sum total; *number* as a noun, refers to collective units. You have an *amount of money*, and a *number of errors*.

ANTICIPATE means to foresee or prevent by prior action. Don't use it when you actually mean *expect*.

APT. Don't use this word when you mean *likely*. *Apt* suggests predisposition. *A tactless person is apt to write a blunt letter*, but *delayed replies are likely* (not *apt*) *to damage public relations*.

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\* Adapted from *Plain Letters*.

ASCERTAIN is a big word often used when the little word *learn* is better. Don't use *ascertain* unless you want to put over the idea of effort in getting facts.

ATTACHED—

PLEASE FIND	}	<i>Attached</i> is adequate
HERETO		
HEREWITH		

ATTENTION IS INVITED OR ATTENTION IS CALLED should be needless. If a sentence doesn't make its point without these emphatics, it needs rewriting.

BETWEEN, AMONG. *Between* properly refers to two only. *Among* is used in referring to more than two.

BIANNUAL, BIENNIAL. *Biannual*, like *semiannual*, means twice a year. *Biennial* means every 2 years.

BIMONTHLY means every two months. *Semimonthly* is used to express twice monthly.

CANNOT BE OVEREMPHASIZED. A much overworked phrase in military writing. Be careful when writing *the importance of this action cannot be overemphasized*. The chances are its importance can very easily be overemphasized.

COGNIZANCE. Avoid this big word both in its legal meaning of *jurisdiction* and in its common meaning of *heed* or *notice*. Instead of saying *under the cognizance of this office*, be specific, as *this office does not audit travel vouchers*.

CONTINUOUSLY, CONTINUALLY. The first word means *without interruption*; the second, *intermittently, at frequent intervals*.

DURING suggests continuously, throughout. *In* (not *during*) *the meeting he brought up the question of pay raises*.

EVENT should not be used for *incident, affair, and happening* unless the occurrence is particularly noteworthy.

EVERY EFFORT WILL BE MADE. In military writing this phrase often means *no effort will be made*. If you intend to make an effort, you will be able to say what effort, when, and by whom.

FACILITATE is a popular military word. It means *make easy*, but it *makes hard* reading for some people.

FARTHER, FURTHER. *Farther* indicates distance; *further* denotes quantity or degree. You go *farther* away; you hear nothing *further*.

FEW, LESS. *Few* is for numbers; *less* is for quantities or amounts. Write *fewer* pages and say *less*.

FULLEST POSSIBLE EXTENT. A meaningless padding.

INDICATE is overworked and *show* is a good substitute.

INFORMED. *You are informed* is a useless phrase in most correspondence.

INITIAL is overworked, but *first* is not used enough.

INITIATE is an Army favorite for which *begin* is synonymous. Sometimes the word can be omitted, as in the phrase *initiate a citation (cite)*.

INTERPOSE NO OBJECTION. Another fancy favorite. Be direct. Say *I approve* or *I do not object*.

KINDLY should not be used for *please*. *Please reply*, not *kindly reply*.

LAST and LATEST are not interchangeable. *Last* means final; *latest*, most recent. The *last* page of a book, but the *latest* book on the market.

LENGTHY means unduly or tediously long. *Lengthy* may describe some of our letters, but *long* is usually the word.

MEETS WITH OUR APPROVAL is a roundabout way to say *we approve*.

NECESSARY is often used when *need* would do. For example, you may shorten *it is not necessary to you need not*.

NOMINAL means *in name*, and by implication, *small*. Why not say *small*?

NONE as a subject is usually plural unless a singular subject is clearly indicated. *None of the jobs are open. None of the work is done*.

NUMEROUS INSTANCES HAVE BEEN REPORTED. A well worn Army favorite. Instead tell what instances apply to whom, when, where, and in violation of what.

ON is superfluous in stating days and dates. *He arrived Tuesday, not on Tuesday*.

OUT is superfluous in phrases like *start out* and *lose out*. *He started (not started out) as a private*.

OVER should be avoided when you mean *more than* in referring to a number. *There were more than (not over) five hundred people at the meeting*.

PART. *Our error* is better than *an error on our part*.

PAST. Say *last year*, not *past year*, if you mean the preceding year.

PORTION. *Part of the time*, not *portion of the time*.

PREDICATED ON THE ASSUMPTION. Forget this one.

PREVENTIVE is better than the irregular doublet *preventative*.

PREVIOUS TO, PRIOR TO. Why not *before*?

PRINCIPAL, PRINCIPLE. The noun *principal* means *head* or *chief*, as well as *capital sum*. The adjective *principal* means *highest* or *best in rank or importance*. Principle means *truth*, *belief*, *policy*, *conviction*, or *general theory*.

PROVEN should not be used as the past participle of *prove*. Use *proved*. Proven may be used as an adjective.

PROMULGATE. A long word for *issue*.

PROVIDING should not be used for *if* or *provided*. *Providing low-cost houses is a problem but we will meet the problem provided the builders get supplies*.

PURSUANT TO. *Under* will usually take the place of this one.

QUITE means *really*, *truly*, *wholly*, *positively*. Avoid its use in phrases like *quite a few*.

RECENT DATE is meaningless. Either give the date of the letter or omit any reference to it.

RENDER. Use *give* in the sense of *giving help*.

RESIDE. The chances are you seldom use this word in talking. The talk word *live* is the natural one for a letter.

STATE is more formal than *say*.

SOME should not be used in the sense of *somewhat*, *a little*, or *rather*. *His letters are somewhat (not some) better*.

SORT. Never say *these sort* or *those sort*. Say *this sort* or *those sorts*.

STILL REMAINS. *Still* adds nothing to the meaning of *remains*.

SUBSEQUENT TO. *After*.

TERMINATED. *Ended* may be just as final.

THIS—

IS TO INFORM YOU. Omit.

IS TO ACKNOWLEDGE AND THANK YOU. *Thank you* is enough.

UNKNOWN should be avoided in the sense of *unidentified*.

UNTIL SUCH TIME AS. *Until* is enough.

UTILIZATION is an inflated word for *use*.

WISH TO APOLOGIZE, WISH TO ADVISE. Instead of the first phrase, simply say *we apologize*. Instead of the second phrase, start with what you have to say.



By Order of *Wilber M. Brucker*, Secretary of the Army :

MAXWELL D. TAYLOR,  
*General, United States Army,*  
*Chief of Staff.*

Official :

R. V. LEE,  
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PMST Jr Div Units (2)	US Army Corps (Res) (10)
PMST Mil Sch Div Units (2)	NG Unit Adgru (2)
Rert Dist (1)	USAR Unit Adgru (2)
Mil Dist (5)	MAAG (5)
CofT (40)	Mil Mis (5)

*NG*: State AG (3) ; units—none.

*USAR*: None.

For explanation of abbreviations used, see AR 320-50.